

Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions

Description

Poster sessions and public availabilities are less structured alternatives to *Public Meetings*. These informal forums are preferred in situations where *Public Meetings* are not required. Poster sessions are a refinement of public availabilities in that “posters” are prominently displayed by an expert who is at that location to discuss the topic specified in the poster.

Poster sessions/public availabilities serve many purposes:

- They are an opportunity for getting feedback and for uncovering issues about the site that are not fully understood by the community;
- They present a great deal of detailed information on multiple topics in a short time period;
- They break down complex concepts into understandable terms;
- They allow the site team to clarify any previous misunderstandings;
- They allow individual community members to easily locate and inquire about the issues that most concern them without having to attend an entire *Public Meeting*;
- They afford the opportunity for less outspoken citizens to be heard individually;
- They allow residents to speak freely with EPA personnel on a one-on-one basis;
- They help citizens speak with you and get to know you and other members of the site team as caring, listening people who are willing to talk about their concerns; and
- They focus on the material at hand, not on emotions, and minimize grandstanding.

Required Activity?

No.

Making it Work

When to Use

Use public availabilities/poster sessions when you have a great deal of compartmentalized information to present in detail. They also are good for covering special topics that are generating, or are likely to generate, concern among residents. For example, if local drinking water is affected by the site, have information available on how and why local water is affected, what types of actions EPA is considering, or taking, and how residents can help protect themselves.

This tool is useful for periodic updates and continued contact with the community. This shows that the site team will provide site information throughout the process, not just when required by law.

When preparing for the Proposed Plan *Public Meeting*, it is advantageous to have a poster session/public availability shortly after the plan is released and before the *Public Meeting*. The site team can use the citizens’ questions to develop the Proposed Plan *Public Meeting* agenda. You may circumvent a potentially heated situation at the *Public Meeting* by knowing and understanding the community’s concerns and questions before the Proposed Plan *Public Meeting* is held. You can have a court recorder to take citizen comments.



[See Public Meetings, Tab 32](#)

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Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions

Public availability/poster sessions are commonly used in the early stages of the Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study (RI/FS) process. This puts people at ease by answering any questions they have about what will be done at the site, what contaminants have been found, and what steps EPA is taking to protect safety. This also allows the community a chance to develop confidence in EPA's decisions about the site's cleanup activities.

It is wise to schedule a public availability/poster session before deletion of a site from the NPL. This final session would be for the public's benefit. It would bring closure for the residents and provide the last opportunity for citizens to question what EPA has accomplished for them. The residents can be assured that all the necessary cleanup activities have been completed, and that EPA cared enough to clarify any final questions.

Generally speaking, all poster sessions/public availabilities should be held during hours that are convenient for community members. Generally, these events work best when you provide access during both day and evening hours, such as between 2:00 PM and 5:00 PM and then again between 7:00 PM and 9:00 PM. Depending on your community, Saturday afternoons may be a good alternative.

Do not use this tool to make a major or controversial announcement. It is usually hard for residents to appreciate any answers from the site team when they feel that a bad news "bomb" was just dropped on them. In this case, the event may deteriorate into a verbal attack against you.

Ensure that the site team is in complete agreement about what information will be distributed. Everyone on the team must know EPA's direction. They must have the same information, the same explanations, and be in agreement about what they will say and use.

Ensure that the site team or regional management is ready to accept and seriously consider community concerns. Offering residents the opportunity to express their concerns and comments implies that EPA will take what they say into consideration.

Avoid scheduling public availabilities and poster sessions at certain times of the year. Residents are less likely to attend site activities held on major national holidays, such as Martin Luther King Day, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, Election Day, President's Day, and any other three day holiday weekends; between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, especially Thanksgiving week and Christmas week; Easter Week, Passover, and other major religious holidays; and any extended school breaks, where parents may take a vacation with their children. Avoid the week of April 15. Do not compete with local special events. Many communities have traditional events or festivals during which they are not interested in other activities. Whatever you do, however, do not compete with them. Know when important weekly community events are and schedule around them. Also, consider vacation periods, such as the yearly period when the largest employer traditionally closes shop.

Do not use this tool as the first communication effort. Poster sessions/public availabilities may not be the best tool to initially inform the community about any topic regarding the site. These forums are generally used for answering questions regarding information that has already been disseminated.

How to Use

To design an effective Poster Session/Public Availability, there are four planning stages:

- Set-up;
- Content and format;

PUBLIC AVAILABILITIES/POSTER SESSIONS

- Response to questions; and
- Follow-up.

You will find several attachments at the end of this tab, including an overall planning checklist, to help you through each of these stages; but here are some basic guides. First, know why you are holding the session and what your message is. Decide: Poster Session or an Availability? Decide time and place.

The facility must meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For requirements, visit the Center for Independence (CFI) **Internet** site: www.gi.net/~cfi/index.html. The site includes weekly updates and information about making your public space accessible: For a free copy of the ADA Guide for Small Businesses, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, call CFI at (970) 241-0315. Provide ample notice. Decide on topics to cover. Schedule a knowledgeable expert to discuss each topic. Ensure the experts are prepared. Hold a dress rehearsal. On the day of the event, arrive early to greet the citizens. Ensure that questions are answered on a one-on-one basis. Meet with the team to discuss lessons learned. Keep a list of, and follow through on your promises.

Tips

- Do not provide inconsistent information to the public.
- Clearly label topics on posters.
- Listen; if you hear the same comments, you might need additional outreach.
- Take every opportunity to make your points. The one thing most people care about is their safety. Practically every conversation will afford the opportunity to address that point.
- Include children as a target audience.
- Do not confine your locations to meeting rooms; consider an area on the site.
- Be sensitive to attempts, whether conscious or otherwise, to monopolize a site team member's time, leaving other citizens impatient for their turn.
- Take advantage of any local call-in radio shows.

RELATED TOOLS/RESOURCES IN THE TOOLKIT

- [Public Meetings, Tab 32](#)
- [Local Resources, Tab 22](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions/Referrals, Tab 18](#)
- [Exhibits, Tab 13](#)
- [Informal Activities, Tab 20](#)
- [Presentations, Tab 29](#)



[See Internet,
Tab 10](#)

Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions

Attached Items Within this Tool

- [Attachment 1: Variations on a Theme](#)
- [Attachment 2: Poster Session/Public Availability Planning](#)
- [Attachment 3: Poster Session/Public Availability Checklist](#)

ATTACHMENT 1: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

- Do something for the children:
 - Hold a poster contest for kids at the event, or for a single school.
 - Include a topic just for kids, like a kids corner.
 - Have an entire event for children, or for a specific school, and hold the event at the school.
- Consider having stamps at each topic area, and a card for citizens to have stamped for each topic area attended. You can have a drawing to win a prize for those who received all available stamps (this also helps you update your mailing list).
- Try to have some “hands on” demonstrations that citizens can do themselves.
- Have a video showing work at the site. Include pictures of workers in protective gear and a few near-by workers in regular clothes.
- Approach an appropriate store or mall to sponsor a small Poster Session/Public Availability or, at least, to allow you to set up a table in a conspicuous spot.
- If the community is having an annual event that is “fair-like” in concept, ask if you may have a booth or table. This allows you to accomplish your goal with only a minimum of work. Check the community calendars of the hospitals, police departments, fire departments, and civic and service clubs for upcoming community events. This gives you the opportunity to participate in the event, attend the event or, at the very least, avoid schedule conflicts.

ATTACHMENT 2: POSTER SESSION/PUBLIC AVAILABILITY PLANNING

PLANNING / EVENT CONTENT AND FORMAT

- Use the Checklist at the end of this tab to ensure that you have done everything possible to make the event go smoothly.
- Know why you are holding the session and what message you wish to convey. Decide if a Poster Session or a Public Availability will accomplish your purpose.
- Check with your community contacts to determine the best time for your activity.
- Check your Community Involvement Plan for preferred locations.
- Give at least two weeks notice, preferably three. Do not rely solely on the obvious ad in the local paper or fact sheet to inform community members. Do something more to grab their attention, such as placing door hangers at their homes (do not use mail boxes for anything other than mail), or handing out flyers in the local supermarket and schools. Use community bulletin boards on radio and TV stations.
- Clearly identify what topics will be covered and who will discuss each topic. The key to holding a successful Poster Session/Public Availability is to have individuals available who can speak knowledgeably about each topic to be covered. If you try to have one person cover too many topics, or do not have someone available who can address questions and concerns about a certain aspect of site activities, it will frustrate or anger those who attend the session. If the session is to have a limited scope, be sure to include that information in your announcements.
- Prepare a list of most-likely questions on each topic covered in the poster session. Take some time to review the last few activities and announcements you issued. Check recent issues of local papers for letters to the editor or editorials that could give insight into community concerns or issues. Help the team prepare appropriate answers.
- Conduct a rehearsal or dry run to make sure all site team members are responding to the potential questions in a uniform manner. Have someone play the role of your average citizen and ask the questions. They should make sure their question is answered directly, and that the team member is not going off on a tangent about another point. You also should listen to ensure that all answers are stated in plain English.

PLANNING / EVENT LOGISTICS

- Arrive before the citizens, so you can welcome them. Allow yourself enough lead time in case you need to rearrange the room or take care of other last minute situations that invariably arise. Have two sign-in sheets at the door; one sheet that the guests will initial for an attendance count, and another list for them to complete if they wish to be put on a confidential mailing list for information about the site. Depending on which method that you choose, you should either give name tags to the representatives, or have nameplates on the tables to identify the team members and their function.
- Design the room lay out to best suit your needs. Take time to think about the best way to line up the team members, in order to make a logical progression through the topics covered as guests move through the room. You could:
- Have the team members seated at tables, with a poster designating the topic covered by each team member hanging on the wall behind that member, and two or three chairs in front of each table for residents to sit in while talking;
- Have the team seated all at one table in a logical order, with posters (tent signs on the table) clearly indicating which topic each team member will discuss;
- Have the team members addressing different topics standing in different areas of the room, again with topic areas clearly marked for anyone who approaches;

- Be the guide or greeter who directs the citizens to the appropriate team member located throughout the room;
- Place a flip chart at the entrance of the room that can be used as a guide. It should identify team members present, their specialty, and where they can be found. Consider having a stack of maps identifying the location of the topics throughout the room. Place them at the entrance, or by the sign in sheets. Be sure to give a few to all team members.
- Familiarize yourself with the facility. Know the locations of lighting system/switches, water fountains, rest rooms, telephones and controls for the sound and ventilation systems, and locate all exits.
- Use effective visual aids. If you are presenting complex technical information, such as different components of a cleanup plan, take advantage of diagrams and maps to help explain what will be done, when, and where. Remember, people usually understand technical information more easily if they can see it, rather than hear or read about it.
- Enlist someone to record important comments, concerns, and suggestions for each topic area covered. This is optional, but it could supply extremely useful information for the EPA. It would also show the community that you care and are seriously interested in their thoughts. At least give every team member a pen and some paper for their use.
- Be open and responsive to all questions posed to you. Answer those nontechnical questions that you can, but remember to refer technical questions to the appropriate site team expert. If no one present has the proper answer to a question, record the person's name, address, phone number, and question and promise to get back to them with an answer; then be sure that you do.
- Have literature or fact sheets available, either at the entrance or with the individual site team members. This serves three purposes: First, it will help the community to better understand the latest happenings, enabling them to ask questions about what they do not already know or comprehend. Second, it gives people something to read if they need to wait to speak to the site team member. And third, it gives people written information to take with them for reinforcement purposes. This is especially helpful if a perception of distrust is brewing.
- Have data and facts to back up your answers. Each site team member should gather information and facts pertaining to their area of expertise so that they can physically present findings/results to the citizens to support their verbal answers.
- Maintain the one-on-one format. Make every effort to answer the questions on an individual basis so that citizens feel the "personal touch" of this activity. If you are the greeter or guide at the door, take a few minutes to explain the concept to the people as you welcome them.
- Above all else, smile, be friendly, appear open, and have empathy for your guests. One goal of this activity is to foster trust and confidence between the community and EPA; nothing goes further than a genuine smile and a truly interested ear!!!

PLANNING - THE QUESTIONS

Go over this basic information with each individual handling a topic area.

- Repeat or rephrase the question before answering. Often, we think we hear and comprehend a question, but it is very possible that you have misinterpreted the question. Restating the question in your own words gives you time to formulate a response while ensuring that you are responding to the right question. It is acceptable to pause and think before responding, it shows that you care about the question and your reply.
- ATQ — Answer the question that was asked at the most basic level; avoid the temptation to go off onto tangents, no matter how relevant they seem to you. Let the citizen set the direction of the session and move you into more technical areas. A too detailed answer may confuse or intimidate the person. However, always be alert for opportunities to make key points on which the site team agreed.
- Remember that every question is a valuable one. Citizens are coming to you for information. Make them feel that their questions are important. Answer them with respect and in terms they can understand. Be prepared to answer the same question several times.

- Be aware of the terminology you use when answering questions; if you have to, constantly remind yourself and the rest of the team members to answer in plain English and simple terms. Of course, use your judgement; if you are dealing with someone who seems to have a firm technical grip on the situation, speak with them on an appropriate level to avoid appearing condescending.
- Never answer in a defensive manner, become argumentative, or enter into a debate. No matter how hostile or agitated a citizen may be or become, always maintain your composure. Answer questions calmly and kindly, then move on to the next person.
- Try to avoid giving an opinion; stick with the facts, do not make editorial statements. Your opinion will be construed as being EPA's position. If they ask for your personal opinion, stick with the party line that EPA has established for that topic.
- Listen - every question is an opportunity for you to gain a greater understanding of your site community. You can uncover the community's concerns, needs, suggestions, desires, and even things to be wary of in the future regarding your site.

The Follow up

- Soon after the session, team members should gather to analyze their effectiveness. The team can discuss what they felt was particularly effective, what could be improved upon, and discuss suggestions obtained from community members at the session.
- Follow up on any promises made to citizens. Send out all information that you promised, and compose a new mailing list including any additional community members who indicated this desire.

ATTACHMENT 3: POSTER SESSION/PUBLIC AVAILABILITY CHECKLIST

Site: _____

MEETING PREPARATION

- ___ Meeting Date & Time
- ___ Meeting Location
- ___ Rental Rate _____
- ___ Seating Capacity _____
- ___ Name _____
- ___ Phone # _____
- ___ # of People Expected
- ___ Someone to Record Comments (record for each topic covered)
Yes ___ No ___
- ___ Staff or Contractors Name _____
- ___ Translator Needed
Yes ___ No ___
- ___ Name _____
- ___ Contacted/Confirmed ___
- ___ Rate _____
- ___ Panel Members Who Will Participate
- ___ Directions Distributed
- ___ Basic Info. for the Event Given to Facility
- ___ Point of Contact for Facility Arrangements
 - ___ RPM
 - ___ Tox
 - ___ Hydro
 - ___ State
 - ___ Local Officials
 - ___ Others
- ___ Prepare Meeting Evaluation Forms
- ___ Prepare Visual Presentation Materials
- ___ Set Dry Run Date and Location
Date _____ Time _____
- ___ Location _____
- ___ Conduct Dry Run
- ___ Establish Ground Rules
- ___ Last Minute Review and Pep Talk for the Team

ANNOUNCEMENT

- ___ Call All Key Community Contacts
- ___ Print Set of Mailing Labels
- ___ Prepare and Distribute Fact Sheet
- ___ Prepare Press Release
- ___ Release Date: _____
- ___ Send Materials to Information Repositories

AUDIO-VISUAL EQUIPMENT

- ___ Slide Presentation/Projector
- ___ Overhead Transparencies/Projector
- ___ Videotape Presentation/Television Set
- ___ Film Presentation/Projector Decor
- ___ Projection Screen
- ___ Microphones (stationary &/or remote)
- ___ Cassette Recorder/Tapes/Batteries
- ___ Press Hookup (for radio & TV mics)
- ___ 35mm Camera/Flash/Film

- ___ Video Camera/Tape
- ___ Extension Cord
- ___ 3-Prong Electric Adaptor (several)
- ___ Pointer for Projection Screen
- ___ Extra Bulb for Projectors

ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

- ___ Room Layout _____
- ___ Meets ADA standards
- ___ Room Setup
- ___ Tables ___ Chairs Is There a Cost? ___
- ___ Who Does it? You ___ Them ___
- ___ Time Available _____
- ___ Set-Up Time _____
- ___ Must Vacate by Time _____
- ___ Security (meet prior to & day of)
- ___ Janitorial Services
 - ___ Restrooms Open
 - ___ Ventilation
 - ___ First Aid Supplies
 - ___ Return Room to Original Condition
 - ___ Who Does it? You ___ Them ___
- ___ Telephone Access in Case of Emergency

BASIC SUPPLIES

- ___ Name Plates/Name Tags
- ___ Directional Signs
- ___ Evaluation Form
- ___ Copies of Most Recent Fact Sheets (and other handouts)
- ___ 3" x 5" Index Cards
- ___ Pens/Pencils
- ___ Markers
- ___ Easel/Flip chart
- ___ Poster Paper
- ___ Pad of Blank Paper (for each site team member, and extras)
- ___ Masking Tape
- ___ Scissors
- ___ Business Cards
- ___ Plastic Drinking Cups ~ Pitcher
- ___ One Yard of Strong Cord
- ___ Stapler

MEETING FOLLOW-UP

- ___ Return Equipment
- ___ Debriefing Among Meeting Participants
- ___ Respond to Requests for Information
- ___ Prepare/Distribute Meeting Summary
- ___ Prepare Meeting Evaluation
- ___ Prepare and Distribute Recommendations for Future Sessions
- ___ Add Meeting Attendees to Mailing List
- ___ Send Names & Phone #s to GPRA Contractor

